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AUTHOR Dennis, Marguerite J.
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ABSTRACT

This brochure is designed to help college applicants and their families to obtain the information they need to select a college. The brochure opens by listing five basic points to set the stage for gathering information and making a decision. There follows discussion of 10 criteria to consider along with an "insider tip" for each criterion and suggested questions to ask, things to examine, and points to consider. The criteria are: size; location; faculty; academic program; financial aid program; dormitory; social, cultural, recreational, and athletic environment; safety; retention program; and alumni. The next section discusses the campus visit and suggests places to include on that visit, individuals to speak with while on the visit, and 10 questions to be sure to ask. The brochure offers five final thoughts on selecting a college. (JB)

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An Insider's Guide to Selecting a College or University

By
Marguerite J. Dennis
Dean of Enrollment

Suffolk University
Beacon Hill,
Boston, Massachusetts

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Selecting a college or university is a major investment in time and money and will in many ways affect you for the rest of your life. For the past several years, statistics indicate that one out of every two college students will not graduate from the school they enter. I am certain that there are several factors contributing to this statistic. I am also certain that the college selection process is one of them.

The tips contained in this booklet are designed to help you, the college applicant, and your family to ask the questions and obtain the information that I believe will help you to select the college or university which will be the right school for you. My opinions are based on my 30 years' experience as a college admission and financial aid director. I hope you will agree with me that this guide proves useful in helping you decide on your college choice.

Let's begin.

Marguerite J. Dennis
Boston, Massachusetts
1994

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How to Choose a College

Five Basic Points

1. You can only select a college or university if you first know why you want to go to college and what you expect from the college experience. I realize that most high school students do not know this with certainty. But it is never too early to begin thinking about these questions. Maybe you want to get a good education or a good-paying job after college. Those are good reasons to think about why you want to go to college.

2. Most applicants and their families are confused about selecting a college or university. Confusion is a by-product of having many choices. There are over 3,000 schools in the United States. Each school is unique and has something specific to offer its students. It is your job to find the college that will match your needs. Applicants and their families should be proactive during the college selection process.

3. Some students depend only on the advice of their guidance counselor and begin to ask questions at the start of their senior year. This really is too late, and it puts an unfair burden on the guidance counselor. The later you start your investigation of colleges and universities, the greater the risk of limiting choice. I recommend that you begin this process 18-24 months before your desired enrollment date.

4. Begin obtaining information on all the schools you are considering from their admission offices. But, in addition, obtain as much information as you can from other sources, such as recent graduates and current students.

5. After reviewing information on many schools, narrow your choice to no more than five or six colleges and get further information on those schools. Remember to keep your options open. For example, don't exclude a school only because of costs. Your investigation may reveal that the more costly college offers more financial aid than a school that is less expensive.

Try to keep an upbeat attitude during your selection process. Think of this as an opportunity, not a chore – a step toward creating a bright future for yourself.

Where to Begin – Ten Insider Tips

In selecting a college or university, consider the following:

1. ***Size*** – Many students prefer schools which provide an opportunity to have small, interactive classes with lots of individual attention from faculty. Other students prefer large, auditorium-style classes. The chances of getting called on to answer questions are less likely to occur, and some students prefer a more impersonal learning environment.

   Insider Tip – Some colleges and universities claim to have small class sizes. However, what you should ask about is the average class size for freshmen. Since first-year students often take introductory courses, those classes are usually larger than the elective courses students take in their third and fourth years. Ask what courses you are likely to take in the first year and the average size of those classes. Find out if classes are lectures or interactive discussions and if examinations are essay or multiple-choice questions. The latter type of test is sometimes indicative of large classes. If the admission counselor cannot provide this information, ask someone in the registrar's office during your campus visit.

2. ***Location*** – Many 18-year-olds think there can't be too great a distance between them and their parents. However, after the first flush of freedom passes and the reality of dormitory living sets in, most freshmen wish they could come home for a long weekend or holiday.

Insider Tip – Talk to students at the college or university you are investigating who live far away from their homes and those who live close by. Ask them to give you their perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of living near or far away from home.

Ask yourself the following questions: Is it important to you to have access to films, plays, concerts, restaurants, museums? Do you have to live near mountains or water? Do you like to hike in the spring or ski in the winter? If you answered yes to the first question, you may want to limit your choice to schools near a major city. If you answered yes to the second and third questions, maybe you should investigate schools in a more rural setting.

3. ***Faculty*** – There is probably no more important aspect of your college selection process than a school's faculty. These men and women will influence your college experience more than anyone or anything else. How can you evaluate the school's faculty?

Insider Tip – Find out from the admission counselors who teaches freshmen courses. Are they taught by full-time faculty or graduate assistants? Also find out the number of faculty with Ph.D. degrees, the number of full-time and part-time faculty and the number of graduate and undergraduate students. Find out if the emphasis is on teaching or research. Ask about faculty advising and after-class availability. During your campus visit, ask current students about their teachers. Since I think the best teachers should be assigned to freshmen, I would weigh heavily the answers to these questions.

4. ***Academic Program*** – There are some basics which you should consider from any college or university you select.

Insider Tip – Find out from the admission counselors or from current students how much time is spent studying, what courses are needed for graduation and the number of credits required to graduate. Examine core courses, integrated studies programs, largest majors, language requirements, major requirements, honor courses, double-major opportunities, internships and combined degree programs. What are the school's strongest majors? Weakest? Why? Compare this information with all of the schools you are considering. This data is important in helping you to learn the standards of the academic program at each school.

5. ***Financial Aid Program*** – Increasingly, this is becoming the most important factor in a family's decision on what school to select. That's unfortunate, because many higher-priced schools offer more financial aid than less expensive schools. About 80 percent of all students enrolled in private colleges and universities receive some kind of financial aid. The same statistic for public schools is about 40 percent. The "net" cost of attending a private school may be equal to the cost at a public institution.

Insider Tip – Many schools, in an attempt to enroll students, offer substantial financial aid "packages" to first-year students. Don't assume that the same amount of money will be awarded the second, third and fourth years. Ask the financial aid counselor if you can expect to receive the same amount of grant, loan and work assistance (assuming your family's financial situation remains the same). Ask for a profile of the students receiving aid, how many students borrow, the types of loans, interest rates and the average indebtedness of

last year's graduating seniors. Find out what happens if a family's financial circumstances change. A red flag should go up if you can't get answers to these questions.

No matter what your family's income is, file for financial aid. You may be eligible for scholarship money which is not based on financial need. Only if you file for aid can you be considered. Ask the financial aid officer if you can get an early estimate of your financial aid award. This will help you and your family to determine whether or not you can afford to attend the school. Request from each college or university a list of all estimated expenses and expected tuition increases. Investigate monthly payment plans and installment options.

6. ***Dormitory*** – A big part of the college experience for residential students is dorm life. It's easier to adjust to college if you have a comfortable living arrangement and a suitable roommate. Are housing alternatives available? What about religious or special dietary needs?

Insider Tip – Ask to speak with a resident assistant. Find out if freshmen are housed together or in mixed dorms. What about co-ed dorms? Ask if you keep the same dorm all four years or if you change rooms every year. What are the options if you don't get along with your assigned roommate? Discuss the advantages of living on-campus, off-campus and commuting.

7. ***Social, Cultural, Recreational, Athletic Environment*** – Here is where your specific needs and personality come most into play. Are Saturday afternoon football games a must? Are fraternities or sororities important to you?

Insider Tip – Think carefully about a school that has a reputation among students as a party school. Is that aspect of college life important to you? Ask yourself how important athletics are to you. I'm not denying the importance of athletics in fostering school spirit. However, I don't think you should enroll in any school only because of the school's football or basketball teams.

8. ***Safety*** – Many families are not aware that all colleges and universities are required by federal law to keep a record of all the crimes that occur on their campuses. This is public information and must be made available to all enrolled and prospective students and their families.

Insider Tip – Compare the campus crime record of all the schools you are considering. Ask to receive a copy of the school's crime brochure, which should outline safety tips and procedures. Also find out what kind of protective services are available. Compare the crime rates of all of the schools you are considering.

9. ***Retention Program*** – Some of the most important aspects, and also the most overlooked, are a school's retention statistics. Remember, one out of every two college students will not graduate from the school he or she entered.

Insider Tip – In addition to asking what a school's graduation rates are, ask the percentage of freshman students who progress to the second semester and then to sophomore year. Since most students leave college in the first two or three semesters, this is a more important statistic for you to know. Find out what the college does for students in academic difficulty, the rules about probation and the availability of special academic advisors and tutors. If the admission counselor doesn't have this information, ask how you can obtain it. Then compare the information from each of the schools you are considering.

10. ***Alumni*** – It may seem strange to think about graduates of a school before you even enroll. However, alumni can assist in helping you to evaluate a school.

    Insider Tip – Many schools use alumni as part of their admission programs. If this is not a part of the admission process, ask an admission counselor to give you the names of one or two graduates. Ask these alumni what they liked and disliked about their school. Ask them if they would select the same school if they had to choose again. Compare the answers to these questions with all of the school you are considering.

The Campus Visit

Most college admission programs offer prospective students and their families the opportunity to visit their campuses. I would urge all prospective applicants to take advantage of this invitation and to make the appropriate arrangements with an admission counselor to spend one day at each school. Here is what I would ask to see:

1. ***One or two classes*** – Make one a freshman class. Observe the class size, the interaction between students and the faculty member teaching the class.
2. ***Dormitory room*** – Look at the size of the room and what's provided. Compare with each of the schools you are considering. If students are around, ask them about dorm life.
3. ***Library*** – Depending upon the time or day, the library will be either crowded or empty. Ask a librarian about the library services at each of the schools you are considering.
4. ***Cafeteria*** – Ask an admission counselor, or a student guide if you are on a tour, about the cafeteria services. If you have special dietary needs, ask if they can be accommodated. Find out when the cafeteria is open and what options are available if you miss a meal.

5. ***Bookstore*** – This should be a fun stop on your tour or day visit program. At some schools, the bookstore is like a full-service department store, selling just about anything a student could want or need. If available, get a recent book list with prices and then compare with each school you are considering.

During the campus or day visit program, I would ask to speak with:

1. ***Admission Counselor*** – This is a good person to ask for answers to all of the questions outlined in the Insider Tips section of this booklet. If the admission counselor doesn't have all of the answers to your questions, ask that the information be mailed to you.
2. ***Financial Aid Counselor*** – Pick up all of the forms to apply for financial aid. Ask the counselor to explain the financial aid process, how and when you will be notified of the school's financial aid offer and what you and family can do if the financial aid award is insufficient to meet your financial need.
3. ***Registrar*** – Ask to speak with someone in the Registrar's Office. Ask how freshmen are assigned classes and what is a typical freshman schedule. If you don't already have one, this is the office which can give you the school's catalog which outlines all of the academic regulations as well as course descriptions.
4. ***Placement Director*** – Many colleges and universities publish statistics on students who work, the types of jobs they have and what happens to students after graduation. Ask for the most recent copy of the employment profile of alumni.

5. ***Resident Director, Athletic Director, Student Activities Director*** – I'm going to leave the next stop up to you. What part of the college selection process do you want more information about? Make that the next stop on your visit. You probably won't be able to meet with program directors, but ask to speak with someone. Get informational brochures and compare this information with all of the other schools you are considering.

Ten Questions to Ask

Throughout the course of your visit to each campus, try to get answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a description of a "typical" student at this school? For example, an admission counselor could respond that the majority of students commute and are first-generation college students.
2. How much time do students study each day? If you are on a tour, ask your student tour guide; this will give you some indication of how much time you would spend studying each day at that school. Then compare responses with each school you are considering.
3. How available are faculty advisors? Get input from both students and faculty. This is an important question, since faculty play such an important role in a student's life and academic program.
4. Why do students leave or transfer? Ask this question when you make your stop at the Registrar's Office. The answer will give you some indication of the school's retention program.

5. Are safety and crime issues on the campus? Ask students you meet during the day this question and compare their responses with the crime statistics provided by each school.
6. Is career counseling available? Get this information when you visit the Career Counseling and Placement Office.
7. What percentage of the student body participate in intramural sports and extra-curricular activities? The admission counselor can usually provide the answers to these questions, which will give you some insights into campus life.
8. What opportunities are there for internships and international exchange programs? Many college students are interested in spending a semester or year away from their home campus. If this is important to you, get this information from the admission counselor and compare the opportunities with each of the schools you are considering.
9. Can you compare computer facilities and find out if students are required to purchase their own computer? Also find out if there are specific mandatory fees or other purchases required.
10. This is a very subjective question, but it's one I like to ask. Can you find out from anyone on campus who will tell you what the "best" thing is about the school and the "worst" thing? Compare these answers with your impressions and with what you have been told. The answers should match up.

Five Final Thoughts on Selecting a College

1. Don't select a college or university only because your friends are going there. Avoid the "herd" mentality. What is right for one person may not be right for you.
2. Look for a school that meets your needs. Follow the suggestions outlined in this booklet to determine what your needs are.
3. Try to begin your college search 18-24 months before your desired enrollment date. An early investigation of schools will give you more options.
4. Don't base your college selection on cost alone. There is little evidence to prove that the most expensive schools provide a better educational experience than less expensive schools.
5. Observe the specific admission and financial aid deadlines of each college you are considering. Deadlines will differ from school to school. Apply as early as possible for financial aid so that you don't miss out on available funds.

Remember, selecting a college or university is one of the most important decisions you will make in your life. Take the time and follow these guidelines. It will be worth your investment of time and energy. Good luck!